R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 016 678 TE 500 038

COMMITTEES ON GRADUATE STUDENTS, AN ANSWER.
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COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSN. INC.

PUB DATE NOV 67

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.20 3P.

DESCRIPTORS- #ENGLISH, #GRADUATE STUDY, #DOCTORAL PROGRAMS, #STUDENT TEACHER RELATIONSHIP, #FACULTY ADVISORS, EDUCATIONAL GUIDANCE, TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY, GRADUATE PROFESSORS, TEACHER INFLUENCE, ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY, GRADUATE STUDENTS, ADVISORY COMMITTEES, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY,

THE ESSENTIAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DOCTORAL CANDIDATE AND HIS ADVISOR SHOULD NOT BE DAMAGED BY MECHANICAL ROUTINES OF ORGANIZATION. HOWEVER, DESPITE ALLAN GILBERT'S CRITICISM ("CEA CRITIC," MAY 1967), THE PROSPECTUS AND THE READING COMMITTEE ARE NECESSARY, AND MAY, IN FACT, COUNTER ANY FLAWS IN THE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADVISOR AND CANDIDATE. A GREATER THREAT TO THIS BASIC RELATIONSHIP IS THE MECHANIZED DEPARTMENTAL PRELIMINARY EXAM FOR THE DOCTORATE. AT OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY, THE "GENERALS" TAKE PLACE AFTER A CLOSE PERIOD OF MUTUAL STUDY BETWEEN ADVISOR AND STUDENT AND ARE NEITHER ROUTINE TESTS NOR METHODS OF EXCLUDING THE INCOMPETENT. THIS PROGRAM IS MORE MEANINGFUL THAN THE "SPEED UP" PROGRAM WHICH MAY PRODUCE MORE DEGREE HOLDERS AT A FASTER RATE. NEITHER THE NEED FOR MORE DEGREE HOLDERS, THE PROBLEMS OF INCREASING SIZE AND NUMBERS, NOR THE GENERATIONAL GAPS IN FACULTIES ARE AN EXCUSE FOR ABDICATING THE PROPER ADVISOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE CEA CRITIC," VOLUME 30, NUMBER 2, NOVEMBER 1967, PAGES 3, 8-9. (BN)

Committees on Graduate Students: An Answer

One hesitates to disagree in any fashion with a fellow-teacher so canny, broad-minded and experienced as Allan Gilbert (*CEA Critic*, May 1967). In his basic contention, that we must not allow mechanical routines of organization to damage the essential relationship between the doctoral candidate and his advisor, he is absolutely right. But I would argue that the flaws in reading committees and prospectus reviews are only superficial aspects of the problem, and that there is deeper reason for our concern.

My guess is that in Professor Gilbert's long life of teaching he had, as we all have had, a disagreeable experience or two with some recalcitrant colleague on a doctoral committee, and that he is too much of a gentleman to be more specific. Choosing an oblique approach, he sets himself up as a straw man, who would have to object to theses because of his dramatic conception of the Platonic dialogues, or his reformed opinions about the date of *Samson Agonistes*. His own candid indication of his potential biases is itself assurance that he is prepared to relax his rigidity when called upon to serve on a committee. Objecting to the dissertation prospectus as a device which may fix the solution in amber, he deplores any such obstacle to a change of view which comes with more mature knowledge.

I am quite sure that there are literal-minded and prejudiced professors who can be nuisances on committees, and young men who in their narrow knowledge and extreme eagerness to impress their elders with their superior knowledge make it hell for the candidate. I have seen a prospectus worried and sent back five times for revision, because a dominant member of the graduate committee objected both to style and ideas. But I suspect that Professor Gilbert could reckon with such characters, and I submit that the candidate can learn by the experience as he sees how men of conviction and compassion deal with inexperience and dullness and bias. Though the doctoral thesis and examinations are the perpetual butt of our cynicism and our ennui, they are potentially the most heady experiences in an academic career, and often are the initiation to greatness. As agon, as drama they need acceptance, and acceptance beyond the candidate's advisor demands an audience, a substitute for the full faculty or public which formerly viewed the candidate's defense of dissertation. The committee therefore has a function.

Moreover, some candidates and some advisors are not so competent as others, and it is desirable to have at least a *pro forma* departmental and university check on their rendezvous for the degree. I know the usual answer—don't allow anyone to direct a dissertation unless he is thoroughly competent. Like all counsels of perfection this heads in the right direction, but there is probably nothing in the academic process which will ever fully prevent directors who are senile, immature, or lazy. Some of these we have inherited because of earlier departmental mistakes; others are with us because the pressure of numbers occasionally forces men to direct dissertations before they are quite ready. The former group, under tenure, cannot be abolished; the latter group is inevitable, since a man can learn only through an experience demanding enough to risk certain blunders. Against all these difficulties committees are cushions, checks, supplements, correctives, and since they are made up of human beings, they are sometimes obstacles to truth and justice.

The prospectus does not strangle the candidate, I think. It merely forces a man to work out a plan which may come up with certain results, and which will be neither too narrow nor too broad. It is a perfect parallel to his later applications for project grant or research fellowship: a blueprint from which the growing architect will deviate when and where he must. In a genuinely inspired fellowship program like the Guggenheim, the grant is to the man and not to the project, and a program can be completely transformed when the fieldwork, the find in the Public Records Office, or the unexpected new configuration of data points a new direction. No plan should ever disrupt the workings of serendipity; but without plan and approval, academic or financial, one has no chance to take advantage of serendipity.

Despite flaws in the workings of the prospectus and the reading committee, then, I conclude that they are a necessary concession to education within a culture or a community. Their virtues counter the flaws in the personal relationship between candidate and advisor, flaws of ignorance, of narrowness, of inexperience; very rarely, I think, flaws of collusion.

But of course we agree with Professor Gilbert that this relationship is the crucial one. Only thus can knowledge, technique, taste, and even civilization be passed down from one generation of scholars to another. Love for one's teacher is one of the deepest emotions of the profession: we see it in Festschriften with all their dullness and brilliance, in the folklore about George Lyman Kittredge (a redoubtable champion of his candidates in the presence of the eccentric committeeman), and in the block of related dissertations which can come from the work of a great scholar and teacher. With all the nonsense which goes on about the scholar who is a poor teacher we forget that the notable teachers are scholars who have a one-to-one relationship with their students: Socrates, Mark Hopkins, Kittredge, C. S. Lewis, Scaliger, Panofsky, Brodeur, and a host of less glittering names. Since our mushrooming universities find such relationships expensive, they are always ready to decry them, and to take false consolation in the mass audience and the TV circuit. However socially necessary such substitutes for proper teaching may be, the movement from generation to generation of expanding knowledge and wisdom takes place neither in the giant classroom nor in the solitary study. On the undergraduate level the tutorial relationship is almost impossible today, though Harvard and Oxford and Princeton and even Ohio State have made bows in its direction. On the graduate level it is absolutely essential, the more so in this country because we cannot match the Oxford system of the past, and we sometimes must defer until graduate days the basic personal experience of man to man or woman to woman, or any combination you desire. Luckily legislatures are beginning to learn that it costs more to educate a graduate student than an undergraduate, and that this is not only because of nuclear reactors.

But sprawling size and its emulation does present a threat to this basic relationship, and it is not, I think, in Professor Gilbert's committees or prospectuses, since these are mere devices to seal the basic pattern and give it function and realization. A much greater danger is the mechanized departmental preliminary examination for the doctorate. Ohio State's English department has long been proud of its individualistic system. At the end of required course work the candidate seeks out a professor, presumably one with whom he is congenial in temperament and in field of specialization. If they get together they meet during a six-month period regularly for tutorial preparation for an examination in the fields of English and American literature. The meetings involve some agreement on readings, an assessment of prior preparation, a discussion of crucial facts and critical positions, a diagnosis of the student's capabilities and weaknesses, a "dry run" to break the ice for the formal examination. Together they choose a proper committee of five, including the advisor, who will share in the reading of the three-day written examination. Departmental secretaries type the candidate's handwritten answers and xerox them, so that each member of the committee can have a serious and not a perfunctory view of all the answers, and not merely those of his own field. The examination questions are individually tailored to bring out the best in the student, whether he be a new critic, a technical bibliographer, a folklorist, or a linguist. The committee helps by its supervision to see that the specialization is not too great; the advisor sees to it that the candidate is properly tested on the special field as well as the general. The oral follows about a week later. After the generals are passed, a prospectus is worked out by the candidate with the help of the advisor, and this prospectus is submitted to the departmental Graduate

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GRADUATE COMMITTEES

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mmittee. Though this submission is re or less *pro forma*, it is a check inst such absurdities as "Commas in negan's *Wake*" or "Tragedy in Eng- and American Literature." In the cess many useful hints come from other cialists, or men outside the field. Only ely have I seen serious obstructionism. e reading committee for the dissertation y evolve out of the original committee, it may be reconstituted to allow more cialized readers; a mixed committee osen for breadth may evolve into a mmittee of medievalists or specialists in nerican literature. Augmented by the aduate school representative from an- her department, this committee reads e dissertation and conducts the final al examination.

Most of this is old hat to anyone who s either administered or experienced h.D. programs. But there is one place here we seem to differ from some other hools. The "generals" take place after very close period of mutual study be- ween student and advisor. They are not utine tests, but exercises to get the best ssible out of each individual candidate. hey are not methods of excluding the competent. That we do earlier, by iarterly review of the progress of each udent's work, based on a comment from ch teacher on each graduate student his class, a comment which is supposed justify the grade which has been given. he review is by the full graduate faculty, that the word gets around about the ademically incompetent. I have called e Ph.D. examinations and theses an gon and a drama; my metaphor need not clude tragedy.

Of late some have argued for a more utine examination taken merely as an clusory measure. Cited are parallels ith other schools with large numbers of raduate students, or the Allen speedup rogram, or the occasional candidate who orries our consciences because of slow or ratic progress. There will always be stu- ents who slide by the early stages be- use of charm or pathos, and no rou- nized examination from an anonymous mmittee will eliminate them—at some oint a human being must make a choice r a miracle must be achieved. The speed- p program, more concerned with feeding e hungry market than with improving uality, is a compromise program at best, rit on paper if not in water. It is akin to rtain high-school anti-dropout pro- rams, as I have heard them explained by ducationists — eliminate the hard-core ademic courses and the students won't rop out. Such an explanation closes its es to the social and psychological rea- ns for the dropping out and raises the uestion of why one wants student to main in school at all if they are not oing to learn anything there. (I am not pposed to technical and trade education, sensible and valuable and much needed procedure.) In similar fashion those who argue for the Ph.D. speedup fail to ask why we want more Ph.D.'s—because we have a certain respect for the degree which assumes that it guarantees a certain kind of expertise. If we just wanted more teachers there is no problem; we can hire M.A.'s, "A.B.D.'s", Fredson Bowers' new intermediate degree holders, or even B.A.'s. Nowadays, I suspect, all teachers get placed somewhere. Our responsibility is to keep up the quality.

If we want speedup it is our task also to consider why there is slowdown. Perhaps the English and American fields have grown like Topsy, and there is some reason to cut down the portions of the field being examined to, say, three out of six major periods and one out of three or four technical subjects. Financial need is the major cause of slowdown, complicated by the tendency of students to marry young and to have children. It is not the professors who hold the students back; indeed there is much need to spur them on by building up their confidence in themselves. And this almost always demands an interested teacher, an advisor of the kind I have mentioned. Sometimes this kind of teacher is described as being paternalistic, and it is argued that one makes more responsible and mature doctoral candidates by ignoring them—by letting them make all their mistakes by themselves. Teacher-student apathy, lack of communication, and the production line have not been notable in making more responsible B.A.'s, nor do they make better Ph.D.'s. Strong men need advice and even a shoulder to cry on; brilliant men are more conscious of their mistakes than the self-confident and mediocre.

If a school is able to administer the kind of traditional guidance of which I have been speaking, it should not be forced to turn to routine measures, the desperate measures of schools which have too many graduate students and which lack the professorial help and talent to provide personal instruction. The proper answer is not to make such schools larger or to imitate their failures, but to allow the combined forces of government fellowship, publicity, and freedom of choice to share the burden of students with those schools whose professoriate still has a sense of responsibility.

One fears that another reason for such abdication of the proper advisor-student relationship is the lowering of the age brackets within the professoriate. The same relationship between maturity and bright beginnings exists, or should exist, between the older professor and his newly fledged colleague. Yet generational gaps in faculties grow, because of market pressures and raiding, and the younger men, less secure in their own personal assurances, seek to substitute machinery for mature guidance. More and more young men are being thrown quickly into advisory tasks, and they have conscience

enough to worry about their performance. Perhaps they worry too much about its role in their own promotion, and their trepidation is increased by the cynical slogan of "publish or perish," by submissiveness to bureaucracy even while picketing against it, by experience as excluders of the incompetent student of Freshman English, and even by the sophomoric position, present to all of the newly initiated: "Now I'm in and I can keep you out." These are not my inventions; I have been told such things in confidence.

Such young men are the salt of the earth and the future teachers and scholars of excellence. They will have to learn through an agon and a perpetual drama much more wearying and traumatic than that of the Ph.D. which is its gentle prelude. I have no doubt that they too will sometime believe as strongly as Professor Gilbert or I that the closeness of the expert and his apprentice is the salvation of the academic world. A doctor is no mere product of a bureaucracy or a system; he is a man who has come into contact with many fine minds among his own generation, teachers a little older than he and teachers much older than he. He may know many well, but the charge on the system is that he know one especially well. And the more skillfully he has been trained the more quickly he will himself adapt to the system, and the more surely he will be able to contribute himself to the continuity of learning.

Nothing I have said is meant to stifle the normal present spirit of rebellion, of adjustment to necessity, of re-examination of the weaknesses in the system and their correction. But even in these days of mass action, needed in a time when a nation has grown fat and heedless of social disease, the training of the expert must not be trifled with. Indeed, it is wanted more than ever in a time of transition, in a time when we question the ineptness of administration, the flaws of over-organization, the inhumanity of computer-run universities. At the center of such training sits the devoted scholar and teacher who really has something to teach to the doctoral candidate with whom he works intimately. That candidate has survived a battery of questionable tests from kindergarten up. He will not be improved by another one, which is based on statistics and not upon expert direction. Properly fulfilled, a doctoral candidate is a work of art, unique and priceless. We need to contribute to this fulfillment, and you can't have a work of art without an artist. These are days when symbols are appreciated, and it might be well to recall the Creation of Adam on Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling.

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THE CEA CRITIC

Official Organ of the College English Assoc., Inc.

founded 1939

Guest Editor:
Edward Huberman
Rutgers at Newark

Published Monthly
October through June

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Member, Educational Press Association of America.

Published at the Saratoga Printing Co., Inc.
Saratoga Springs, New York
Annual subscription $5.00

2nd Class Postage Paid at Saratoga Springs, N. Y.

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